

CYNTHIA AXNE
3RD DISTRICT, IOWA

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AND CAPITAL MARKETS
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CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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Kelly Garcia
Interim Department Director
Iowa Department of Public Health
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Des Moines, IA 50319

Joyce Flinn
Director
Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency
Management Department
7900 Hickman Road, Suite 500
Windsor Heights, IA 50324

Dear Director Garcia and Director Flinn,

As I've spoken to Iowans who are on the front lines of combating the spread of this novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, I have heard their concerns about the spiking number of cases and need for hospitalization. I write to you today requesting information on Iowa's plans in the event of a shortage of intensive care unit (ICU) beds and the limited capacity of rural Iowa to handle cases in their area.

I want to know how your Department plans to handle COVID-19 cases in our rural communities where there is limited or no ICU capacity and what contingency plan the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) and Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management Department (IHSEMD) has in the event hospitalizations exceed capacity. As you are aware, Iowa's COVID-19 positivity rate is now over 12%, and our hospitalizations are at an all-time high since this pandemic began.

One estimate I've seen approximates that Iowa has just under 12,500 hospital beds across the entire state, the majority of which are in our major urban areas such as Des Moines and Council Bluffs. Even before this outbreak, I've worked to ensure that the health of our rural communities is not ignored – and that all Iowans have access to affordable, quality health care. Under the threat of COVID-19, I'm deeply concerned for our rural hospitals and health centers' ability to manage this global health pandemic. I represent a district where over half the counties have zero ICU bed capacity.

In previous public comments, there has been reference to Iowa having "one health system," but no specifics on if that means that COVID-19 cases requiring intensive care in rural areas will be transported to other facilities within Iowa. I have also not seen a comprehensive plan about how our public health system will serve those in our rural communities during this national health emergency.

While I understand that every necessary measure will be taken to treat these cases, I am seeking an understanding of what methods will be implemented that would help us better address the concerns of our rural health providers and confirm to rural Iowans that their care will not be limited in times of strained capacity.

We all know that even in the best of scenarios, a 'Plan B' is always necessary. Cities like Chicago have had contingency plans in place, while the State of Wisconsin recently began to build more temporary hospital capacity as their cases increase. Iowa's citizens deserve to know what Iowa's contingency plan is in the event that our hospital capacity is overwhelmed in the coming weeks and months. I am prepared to help secure federal assistance to ensure that IDPH and IHSEMD are supported in the case that we need additional hospital beds and rural hospital assistance.

I appreciate those measures of transparency and hope that you will treat this request with the same commitment. No one plans to use a fire extinguisher, but you should know if it's under the sink. As a voice for my constituents, I ask you to confirm that similar preparation has been made for a worst-case scenario, even as we do everything to prevent us from needing to use it.

Sincerely,


Cindy Axne
Member of Congress